

Conversion to Islam: the Qur'anic paradigm

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Introduction

Islam is based on the Qur'an, which is accepted by Muslims as the final revelation from God to man through the medium of His final Messenger Muhammad, whose life is in turn seen as the best example of how this Qur'anic message was and should be put into practice. Thus the two main sources of Islam, whether for matters of belief or practice, are firstly the Qur'an and, secondly, the *sunna*, or normative model, of the Prophet Muhammad, as recorded by those around him and transmitted to those after them down to the present day. In this chapter we look at the phenomenon of conversion to Islam, basing our remarks primarily on what is said about it in the Qur'an and on how this Qur'anic picture was reflected in the lives of the Prophet and the first community of Muslims.

Conversion as 'submission'

There is no word in Arabic for 'conversion' *per se*. Rather, there is the idea of 'becoming a Muslim', for which the verb *aslama* (literally, 'to submit') is used. It is from this verb that the words 'Muslim', which is, grammatically, the active participle and means 'one who submits, a submitter', and 'Islam', which is the verbal noun – equivalent to the gerund in English – and means 'submitting, submission', are derived. Thus it could be said that to understand conversion to Islam, one need go no further than understanding the name 'Islam' itself.

Since the word *islam* is, grammatically speaking, a verbal noun, it has a distinct verbal force behind it. Thus 'Islam' is not simply the name of a religion in the way that, for example, 'Christianity', 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' are, but actually denotes an action – in this case predominantly of the heart, although also of the limbs – that should be the hallmark of this religion, namely, 'submission'. It is in this way that the word *islam* and its associated forms are invariably used in the Qur'an.

Beyond this 'verbal', or active, quality of the word *islam*, the first point to note about the Qur'anic usage of the term is that this activity of submission is associated with all the prophets and not just the Prophet Muhammad. Thus Noah – the archetypal 'early', or pre-Abrahamic, prophet in Qur'anic terms – tells his people that he has been ordered to be 'one of those who submit / one of the Muslims' (Ar. *min al-muslimin*; Q. 10:72). Abraham is associated with *islam* on many occasions: he is ordered by God to 'submit' and he does so (Q. 2:131); he asks God that both he and his son be 'submitters' to Him, as also his descendants (Q. 2:128), and he tells his sons not to die in any state other than one of 'submission' to God (Q. 2:132). Most importantly, he is described as having been neither a Jew nor a Christian, but rather a 'pure worshipper of God (*hanif*) and a submitter (*muslim*)' and one who 'was not an idolater' (Q. 3:67). Indeed, according to one interpretation, it is Abraham who is credited with adopting the term 'submitter' (*muslim*) to describe the pure worshippers of God (Q. 22:78). Joseph, one of Abraham's great-grandsons, asks God to make him die in a state of submission (i.e. 'as a *muslim*'; Q. 12:101). Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, accepts Solomon's prophetic authority and 'submits' with him to God, the Lord of the Worlds (Q. 27:44). Moses encourages his people to be 'submitters' (Q. 10:84), while Pharaoh's magicians, after witnessing the signs of divine authority in Moses' actions, accept that Moses has superior knowledge and, like Joseph, ask God that they be allowed to die as 'submitters' to Him (Q. 7:126). Even Pharaoh himself, when he is about to drown, claims to be a 'submitter', although by then it is too late (Q. 10:90). Later in time, the followers of Jesus acknowledge that they are 'submitters' (Q. 3:52, 5:11), and, in more general terms, the People of the Book (i.e. the Jews and the Christians) who accept the message of the Qur'an acknowledge that they were already 'submitters' beforehand (Q. 28:53). Indeed, all the prophets of

the People of the Book are among 'those who have submitted' (Q. 5:44). It is, perhaps, needless to say that there are numerous references to the Prophet Muhammad and his followers being encouraged, if not ordered, to take exactly the same attitude as the former prophets and to 'submit' themselves to God, the Lord of the Worlds, and not to die except in a state of *islam*, or submission, to Him (e.g. Q. 2:133, 136; 3:20, 64, 84, 102; 4:125; 11:14, 16:81; 21:108; 22:34; 29:46; 39:54).

All of these references make it clear that what is being envisaged here by *islam*, or 'becoming a Muslim', is not simply the acceptance of the outward forms of any one particular prophet's practice, not even that of the 'Seal of the Prophets', Muhammad. Rather, the word represents that pure worship of, and obedience to, the Divine that is exemplified in the lives of all of these prophets, from Noah, through Abraham, Moses and Jesus, to the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad. Thus Islam is, to use the Qur'anic idiom, that one 'submits one's face to God, and acts correctly, and follows the way of Abraham as a pure worshipper [of God]' (Q. 4:124); and whoever takes this path 'will have a great reward with his Lord; – there is no fear on them, neither shall they grieve' (Q. 2:112). It is in this context that the Qur'anic statements that 'the [true] religion in the sight of Allah is *islam*' (Q. 3:19), that 'whoever seeks other than *islam* as a religion [will find that] it is not accepted from him, and in the Next World he will be one of the losers' (Q. 3:85), and that God is pleased with *islam* as the way for people to behave (Q. 5:3), must be understood. Thus to take on Islam, to 'become a Muslim', is in essence to take on the ancient, Abrahamic, way of worship, albeit given the specific detailed requirements reflected in the outward practice of the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad.

What does becoming a Muslim involve?

In historical terms, becoming a Muslim meant – and still means today – accepting God as Lord and accepting the Prophet Muhammad as the final prophet and messenger of this Lord. This two-fold acceptance is enshrined in the double declaration of faith, 'I bear witness that there is no god but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God', which, when said in front of witnesses, marks the formal entry of someone into the community of Muslims. (A fuller definition of this acceptance would include the six

elements of belief, namely, belief in Allah, the angels, the divinely revealed books, the prophets, the Last Day, and the Decree, both the sweet of it and the bitter of it.) From the earliest period until now there has been discussion as to whether this declaration is enough as a sign of genuine belief or whether it should also be accompanied by the correct outward practices detailed by Islamic law that form part and parcel of the practice of Islam. Reports from the Prophet indicate that as long as one makes this declaration with sincerity, one is promised at least eventual entry into the Garden (the Muslim term for Paradise) regardless of one's wrong actions – for which one may or may not be punished – as long as one is not guilty of having associated anyone or anything else with God. Indeed, despite the above-mentioned dispute about what constitutes the true belief assumed behind this statement, its actual declaration is enough to protect someone in a legal sense from the accusation of being a *kafir* (non-believer) and, in conditions of war, from being fought. There is an incident recorded from the lifetime of the Prophet when one of the Companions was fighting in a battle and about to kill one of the enemy when his opponent declared 'There is no god but God and Muhammad is His Messenger'. The Companion nevertheless went ahead and killed him, on the assumption that the man had only said the words in order to save his life. On being told about this, the Prophet made his famous reply, 'How did you know what was in his heart?', thereby making it clear that the words are the minimum requirement and actual belief is a matter between the person and his Lord.

It can thus be seen that in one sense it is very easy to become a Muslim, the only formal requirement being that this dual declaration of faith, known as the *shahada*, is said publicly, that is, in front of witnesses. Nevertheless, there is the assumption that in declaring this statement, the person doing so is prepared to live by its implications, the most obvious being to live by what Allah and His Messenger have decreed for mankind in both the Qur'an – the divine revelation as transmitted by the Prophet Muhammad – and the *sunna*, or normative practice, of the Prophet, which, as mentioned above, together form the basis of Islam and its law, or *shari'a*. In other words, anyone who openly states that he believes in and accepts Allah and His Messenger is expected to live by the dictates of Allah and His Messenger as preserved in the Qur'an and the records of how the Prophet put this Qur'anic message into practice in practical, everyday terms, that is, his *sunna*.

However, the Qur'an itself states 'Have fear of Allah as far as you are able' (Q. 64:16), thus allowing for at least the possibility that not everyone will be able to do everything in terms of a practical expression of the law. More importantly, in terms of minimum requirements, is the Qur'anic statement that 'Allah will not forgive that anything should be associated with Him, but will forgive everything short of that for whoever He wills' (Q. 4:48 and 116), thus allowing the possibility of forgiveness for any wrong action short of the mental, or spiritual, sin of idolatry (*shirk*), that is, associating anyone or anything else with Allah, whether this be a physical or a conceptual idol. This verse, in addition to *hadiths* (Prophetic sayings) indicating that the statement 'There is no god but God' is a protection from the Fire, and that it is the best thing that Muhammad or any of the other prophets before him had said, was the basis for the arguments of the early theologians over what constituted correct belief and who was, therefore, a genuine Muslim.

Two main tendencies emerged. There were those who, following the literal meaning of the *hadiths* referred to above, considered the mere statement of belief to be enough to include someone in the fold of Islam. Others, however, considered it a travesty of the word 'belief' for it to be on the tongue and not appear also as outward action. Indeed, some extremist elements (e.g. the Khawarij, or Kharijites, of the early Islamic period) even considered the commitment of a major wrong action (i.e. in particular, the ones for which serious penalties exist in the law, such as drinking alcohol, stealing, fornication and/or adultery, and murder) to be a clear indication of unbelief and treated such people accordingly, considering it lawful to fight them as unbelievers. However, the dominant position was soon established – and has remained ever since – that although one cannot deny that a person is a Muslim if he says the *shahada*, nevertheless his belief is not complete without action by the limbs, that is, the outward practice of the dictates of the *shari'a*, at least in public. Thus in practice it is expected that, having said the *shahada*, which is the First Pillar of Islam, the new Muslim will pray the ritual prayer five times a day (the Second Pillar), pay the annual alms-tax of *zakat* if he has the required basic sum of money (the Third Pillar), fast the month of Ramadan (the Fourth Pillar), and go on the *hajj*, or pilgrimage, to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if he is able (the Fifth Pillar). Similarly, it is expected that anyone entering Islam will neither drink alcohol nor eat pork or meat of any incorrectly slaughtered animal, and will respect the basic

prohibitions relating to such matters as stealing, committing adultery and/or fornication, murder, and so on.

It should, however, be noted that even commission of these offences does not, in the view of the main body of the Muslims, take someone out of Islam. Rather, the punishment prescribed for them in this world is considered sufficient expiation and the offender is considered free from any further punishment for that offence in the Next World. Furthermore, even the most serious offences are not punishable if committed privately, because witnesses are needed to establish them and it is considered an unacceptable invasion of privacy to try to 'catch someone out' in their own home. Thus, for instance, the story is told of the second Caliph 'Umar going at night into the house of someone he knew to be drinking, only to be told by the man, who had indeed been drinking, 'What right do you have you to go into a man's house without his permission?', at which point 'Umar, acknowledging the correctness of the man's reply, withdrew his accusations and left.

It is also usual for people to take on an overtly 'Islamic' name on becoming Muslim, though not obligatory: this practice dates back to the time of the Prophet who would change people's names if they overtly reflected unacceptable pre-Islamic beliefs or practices. There is also an expectation in some quarters that males should undergo circumcision, should this be necessary, but again, although recommended, this is not considered obligatory, and older people becoming Muslim may well decide not to go ahead with this operation. In fact, circumcision is one of the five *sunan al-fitra*, or 'practices of the natural state of man', that are recommended for any Muslim, the other four being to keep the nails pared, to trim the moustache and let the beard grow, to remove under-arm hair, and to shave the pubic area.

Ways of becoming Muslim

At the risk of over-simplifying, it could be said that there are two basic ways of becoming Muslim, the way of light and the way of power. The way of light is when someone becomes Muslim by individual personal conviction and certainty, regardless of the external difficulties this may bring. The way of power is when someone becomes Muslim by virtue of external circumstances which

make it difficult not to do so. Both these types of 'conversion' are illustrated by the early history of Islam and exemplified in particular by the Meccan and Madinan periods of the Prophet's life, respectively: in the Meccan period, that is, before the Emigration (*Hijra*) of the Prophet from Mecca to Madina, people became Muslim through strong individual conviction of the truth of the Prophet's message, despite the ensuing problems in terms of rejection by the rest of society and even, in some cases, physical torture, that this brought; whereas in the Madinan phase people frequently became Muslim because the leaders of their group had become Muslim: it was, in effect, 'the thing to do', regardless of the depth of individual motive. Thus we see almost the entire population of Mecca accepting Islam at the time of the 'Conquest' of Mecca in the year AH 8 / CE 630 when the Prophet entered Mecca at the head of a large armed force, although there is no record of any 'forced' conversion – indeed, there was practically no blood spilt during the whole enterprise.

At this juncture we should also mention the growing presence of the 'hypocrites' (*munaḥiqun*) in the new community in Madina – a sure sign that there were also people who were becoming Muslim outwardly but had no Islam in their hearts. The size and seriousness of this phenomenon are indicated by the Qur'anic reference to them as 'the [real] enemy' (Q. 63:4). It is also stated in the Qur'an that they will be in the lowest level of the Fire (Q. 4:145), that is, that they will receive the worst form of punishment in the Next World, because of the heinousness of them saying one thing – of so serious a nature – on the surface and holding another in the heart, and indeed in most instances taking every opportunity to actually work against the believers where at all possible. The threat is severe, but not everyone of course is prepared to listen to threats that they do not accept as having divine authority. On which note the third Caliph 'Uthman is recorded to have said: 'People are restrained by the sword in a way that they are not restrained by the Qur'an', which brings us to the matter of Islam and the sword.

Islam and the sword

The claim has often been made – even if only to counter it – that Islam spread by the sword, and yet we have noted that in the Muslim sources it is forbidden for someone to force another to become a

Muslim, that is, to make him do so 'under the sword', as the expression goes. Nevertheless, it is clear that there was considerable military activity associated with the spread of Islam, both within the Arabian peninsula at the time of the Prophet, and in what were later to become the heartlands of Islam in Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Iran, in the time of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs immediately after him.

Perhaps the simplest answer to this question is that Islam spread not so much *by* the sword as *with*, that is, alongside, the sword. For the purpose of the Muslim armies was not so much to make everybody Muslim as to establish Islam, which meant, primarily, establishing Muslim rule. That the people of the conquered territories were not forced to become Muslims is evident from the fact that the majority of the inhabitants of the 'heartland' areas outside Arabia did not become Muslim until many decades, even centuries, after the conquests. (Bulliet, for instance, has suggested on the basis of name-studies that it was not until the fourth century AH that over 80 per cent of the people had become Muslim in Iran, and the same seems to apply to other areas.)¹ It is also well known that some of the main administrators of the early Damascus-based Umayyad dynasty (AH 41–132/CE 661–750), for instance, were Christians, not to mention the fact that there are sizeable Christian and Jewish minorities in Syria, Iraq and Egypt even to this day. If there were mass forced conversions, it is hard to imagine firstly, how people could have taken so long to become Muslim, and, secondly, how in many cases they could have failed to do so even by today! Rather, what seems evident is that the early Muslims were intent on making Islam 'dominant' in the sense of establishing Muslim rule: the longer-term goal of people becoming Muslim could then be left to take its natural course.

Motives for conversion

Much has been written about the motives for conversion. It will be apparent from the above that to a certain extent this is not a problem in Islam. That is to say, once outward 'conversion' has taken place, and been seen to take place, the rest is more or less left up to a person's conscience. Furthermore, different degrees of sincerity are possible. In one of the most famous *hadiths* of the Prophet, and the one which begins the most famous collection of *hadiths*, that of al-Bukhari, we are told:

Actions are by intentions, and everyone will get what he intends. Whoever emigrates for the sake of Allah and His Messenger, has emigrated for the sake of Allah and His Messenger; while whoever emigrates for the sake of some worldly thing that he wants to get or some woman he wants to marry, has emigrated for whatever it is that he has emigrated for.²

In the same way a person's conversion to Islam may be for very varied reasons, and not necessarily from a deep, spiritual motive, but it is still Islam.

One of the characteristics of Islam spreading is that it is generally a one-way traffic. That is, once people have got into Islam – by whatever means – they tend to stay in it and, moreover, deepen their attachment to it. We find this reflected in numerous stories from the early period of Islamic history. Among these is the story of how Abu Sufyan ibn Harb, one of the chief nobles of Quraysh, was on a trading journey to Gaza at around the time the Byzantine emperor Heraclius recovered the Holy Cross from the Persians in the year CE 628 (AH 6). The Emperor, having had a dream, called Abu Sufyan to him to ask him about this man that he had heard about who had appeared in Mecca claiming to be a prophet. In particular he asked him whether his followers followed him with love and loyalty or were prone to leaving him. When he was told that none of them left him, he said, 'This is the sweetness of faith: it does not enter the heart and then leave.'³

A further observation of Abu Sufyan in this exchange was that Muhammad's followers were mainly 'the weak and poor and young slaves and young women; not one of the elders and nobles of his people followed him', thus reflecting the situation of Noah in the Qur'an ('We see only the most abject among us following you'; Q. 11:27) and indicating that it was easier for the less privileged to leave their forefathers' ways and take on the new religion than it was for the more privileged with their strong vested interest in maintaining the *status quo* for reasons of personal wealth and prestige. It was only later, as the Prophet became more successful in a political and military sense, that the leaders also accepted Islam, particularly, as we have seen, at the so-called 'Conquest' of Mecca, when comparatively large numbers of people accepted not only the political but also the religious dominance of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. Indeed, by the time of the Prophet's death in AH 11/CE 632 the whole of the Arabian peninsula had at least outwardly

accepted this dominance, thus illustrating the second of the two main modes of becoming Muslim outlined above, namely, that of Islam by power.

The early sources depict many variations on these two modes. With regard to Islam by light, we find the early Muslims being impressed not only by the Prophet's Qur'anic message of creation, death and ultimate accountability, but also by the excellence of his personal behaviour as manifested, for example, in his exceptional patience, generosity, clemency and courage, the like of which they had never seen before. Particularly impressive for many was his knowledge, not only of the seen world but also of unseen matters: many examples are told of people becoming Muslim when realizing that the only way the Prophet could have known of a particular thing or event was through some divine means (thus reflecting the Qur'anic picture of Pharaoh's magicians accepting and submitting to the authority of the Prophet Moses). We also hear of individual seekers of the truth, sometimes guided by dreams, rejecting idol-worship and eventually finding their heart's desire in the company of the Prophet.

Once people had started accepting Islam, they in turn became a model for others, particularly close associates. It is noteworthy that several of the earliest Muslims were friends of Abu Bakr, the first to become Muslim outside the Prophet's immediate household and himself a close friend of the Prophet. Likewise Mus'ab, the man appointed by the Prophet to call people to Islam in Madina before the Emigration, was the cause of many people becoming Muslim there: they were as much impressed by his qualities of character as they were by the message he had to pass on. Similarly, we hear of leaders of tribes accepting Islam and this leading in turn to the acceptance of Islam by the rest of their tribe.

This latter could be considered an example of Islam by power. Another variant of this mode is that of Islam through marriage. By Islamic law, a Muslim man is allowed to marry a Muslim, Christian or Jewish woman but a Muslim woman may only marry a Muslim man; that is, a man must be Muslim before he may marry a Muslim woman. Thus in the early sources we hear of individuals becoming Muslim because the women they wanted to marry, or were already married to, had become Muslim and would not accept them unless they too became Muslim. This situation continues to be a source of new Muslims to the present day. A corollary of the marriage laws is

that, even where only the father is Muslim, the children will generally be brought up as Muslims, thus furthering the gradual 'Islamization' of society. Another stimulus to this process – or at least a deterrent to its opposite – is the existence of the penalty of death, in certain circumstances, for apostasy, which is balanced by the strong feeling among Muslims that Islam is the final and complete version of the true Abrahamic religion ordained by God for all mankind: what, then, could be better?

Modern theories of conversion to Islam

Modern theories of conversion tend to differ somewhat from what one finds in the classical sources. Most obviously, there is a marked absence of any acknowledgement of either the miraculous or the world of dreams as a cause of conversion. Instead, one finds the general assumption that the vast majority of those who became Muslim either did so because of some material benefit that would accrue to them or some material harm that they would avoid. To an extent, of course, this assumption has some truth in it: power (rather than 'force'), for example, certainly played its part in setting up a situation whereby many people quickly became Muslim, as in the example of the 'Conquest' of Mecca mentioned above. It also seems clear that many people became Muslim in order to avoid some harm that they feared might come to them, as was presumably the case, for example, with the 'hypocrites' in Madina referred to above. But although this might help to explain some aspects of the situation, it does not explain why many people, once they had become Muslim, not only chose to stay in it but also became staunch stalwarts of its cause. Furthermore, as indicated above, recent research has suggested that mass conversion even in the heartlands did not occur until relatively late in the region's history (and even now is not complete): force, if at all applied for this purpose, seems to have been remarkably unsuccessful in getting people to change their religious identity. Perhaps even more importantly, some researchers have shown an *inverse* relationship between the degree of political penetration in certain areas and the degree of conversion to Islam. Eaton, for instance, speaking of the specific case of India, has argued that if conversion to Islam had ever been the function of military or political force, one would have expected the areas of heaviest

conversion to correspond with those areas exposed most intensely and over the longest period to rule by Muslim dynasties. Yet the opposite seems to have been the case; with the regions lying on the fringes of Indian Muslim rule, such as Eastern Bengal or Western Punjab, showing the most dramatic conversion of the population, whereas in the heartland of that rule, the Indo-Gangetic plain, there was a much lower incidence of conversion.⁴

The idea that people became Muslim *en masse* because of expected worldly gains, particularly a rise in political or social status (the theories of 'political patronage' and 'social liberation', respectively), is also shown by the Indian experience to be an inadequate explanation. Though the 'political patronage' theory may possibly account for the relatively light incidence of conversion in the Delhi heartland, it does not account for the massive conversions that took place along the political fringe where the influence of the government was much weaker. (The presence in the early Muslim caliphate of numerous non-Muslim officials, as noted above, also suggests that becoming a Muslim was by no means a necessary prerequisite for political advancement in Muslim society.) Similarly, although much has been said about former caste-structured societies being 'liberated' by Islam, there is considerable evidence that in the Indian instance such stratification often existed as much after the society had become Muslim as it had before. Indeed, it would seem that the Muslims were not at the time overly concerned with this issue: contemporary sources suggest that those who were engaged in presenting Islam to Indians did not stress any ideal of social equality as opposed to Hindu caste, but rather Islamic monotheism as opposed to Hindu polytheism. And again, speaking in geographical terms, the greatest incidence of Muslim conversions occurred among groups that were not fully Hindu in the first place. Thus it seems that, for the vast majority of South Asian Muslims at any rate, the question of 'liberation' from an 'oppressive' Hindu social order was simply not an issue.⁵

The dominant picture that emerges from these studies is that Islam may spread as the result of both militant and peaceful activity. Where there is military activity, the establishment of Muslim political power allows the establishment of Islamic institutions – mosques, courts, etc. – which in turn creates an Islamic ambience which is conducive to more people becoming Muslim. On the edges of the Muslim domains traders, if not warriors, pave the way for

men of religion, perhaps marrying also into the local populace. Once Muslim institutions begin to be set up the process is speeded up by the influence of the respective functionaries, whether judges or *imams* ('prayer-leaders') or, increasingly in later days, Sufi *shaykhs* (men of knowledge). The ensuing conversions may be either individual or communal. Individual conversions generally show greater commitment to the new cause and less 'carry-over' from the past, but the numbers involved are usually small. Communal conversions, on the other hand, involve large numbers of people, but the resulting society often exhibits much less of a break with pre-Islamic patterns and practices. These frequently remain, albeit in a modified form, until reform movements spring up later with the aim of bringing the newly Islamized – or partially Islamized – society into conformity with the greater world of 'orthodox' Islam beyond. Thus the society eventually becomes fully Islamized and finds itself integrated into the greater Islamic society elsewhere.

Brief mention should be made at this point of the role of the Sufis, whose influence in spreading Islam is generally accepted to have been very great. Indeed, it has been stated that it was only with the growth of the Sufi movement in the tenth century that Islam spread beyond the frontiers of the Muslim states; before that conversion had occurred only within the Muslim dominions.⁶ It remains true today that Sufism, with its emphasis on a universal, non-intellectual but very real *tawhid*, or science of God's unity, is still one of the main points of entry into Islam for contemporary Europeans.

Contrary to this tendency is the claim by certain Muslims – especially those of a 'modernist', anti-Sufi outlook – that Islam appeals by its 'rationality' and that an unbiased study of the texts will – or should in theory – lead to the reader becoming Muslim. However, this view not only denies – or at least severely restricts – the intervention of the Divine (i.e. the miraculous) in such matters, but also assumes that there is only an intellectual recognition of truth and no other. A careful reading of the sources would suggest that becoming a Muslim is not a question of being convinced by rational means but rather by a recognition of the heart (the seat of the 'intellect' [*ʿaql*] in Qur'anic terminology), whether on an individual or communal basis, that is, whether by recognition of light or power, to use the distinction outlined above. If it were by intellect, one would have expected the majority of people – supposedly rational – to have become Muslim by now, but this is not the case, nor was it in

the early period. By all accounts it would seem that when the first Muslims left Arabia they did not – and did not need to – present ‘rational’ arguments for Islam; for the most part they did not even know the languages of the people whose lands they conquered. Rather, they declared their Islam and embodied it and sought to impose the *shari’a* as a governing structure when and where they could and to the best of their ability.

However, there seems to be a universal tendency – especially among scholars – to rationalize even what cannot be rationalized, and once a rational argument has been put to the scholastic mind it is often hard for that type of mind to affirm what seems to be a non-rational position. And yet the original event, and the revelation resulting from that event, defy complete rationalization, and cannot have been accepted by the first Muslims on that basis. As one of the early scholars of Islam, Malik (d. AH 179/CE 795), said, when someone insisted on delving into the meaning of the Qur’anic expression that God had ‘settled’ on the throne (Q. 20:5): ‘You have asked about what is not unknown (*ghayr majhul*) and have spoken about what cannot be encompassed by the intellect (*ghayr ma’qul*). I think you are a man of no good. Get him out of here!’⁷ Indeed, as has been said, anyone who can argue themselves into Islam can argue themselves out of it again.

Given the infinite possibilities of motive, or combination of motives, it is, ultimately, impossible to explain why people become Muslims and, more especially, why they should remain so. One could speak of the natural appeal of the ancient religion of Abraham that offers freedom from creation in slavery to the Real. Or one could speak of the justice and tolerance of the Muslims in comparison with the oppression of others (as seems to have been the case, for instance, with the Byzantine dominions at the time of the initial Muslim conquests). One could even posit a desire on the part of some to achieve a higher status for themselves in society. These are just some of the possibilities. Muslims are called to invite others to Islam, that is, to submit themselves to God, but the results are not guaranteed, either by the intellect or any other means: some will become Muslims and others will not, and for differing reasons. More importantly, once people have formally accepted Islam, their attachment tends to grow stronger and deeper with time – often within a very short space of time – regardless of the means by which they made the initial move. Perhaps in time researchers will find that

the most convincing ‘explanation’ of the phenomenon is that referred to in the Qur’an itself: ‘You do not guide whoever you like, but Allah guides whoever He wants; and He knows best those who are guided’ (Q. 28:56).

A note on sources

In addition to the sources referred to in the text, the following compilations of essays contain a wealth of further information on the subject:

Gervers, M. and Bikhazif, R. J. (eds), *Continuity and Change: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990)

Levtzion, N. (ed.), *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979).

Notes

1. See R. W. Bulliet, ‘Conversion to Islam and the Emergence of a Muslim Society in Iran’, in N. Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), p. 31.
2. M. M. Khan (trans.), *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari* (Ankara: Hilal Yayinlari, 1974), vol. i, p. 1.
3. A. Guillaume (trans.), *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 655.
4. See R. M. Eaton, ‘Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India’, in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. R. C. Martin (Tucson, AR: University of Arizona Press, 1985), pp. 107–8.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 108–11.
6. See N. Levtzion, ‘Toward a Comparative Study of Islamization’, in Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam*, p. 17.
7. See Ibn Rushd (al-Jadd), *al-Bayan wa-l-tahsil* (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1987), vol. 16, pp. 367–8.